

THE STORY OF HENRY BOX BROWN: MAILING YOURSELF TO FREEDOM

Find out how a 200-pound man survived the trip in a coffin-like box.

By HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.
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Henry Brown expressed his own desperate desire to be free in a novel form: He actually *mailed* his own body from slavery to freedom, from Richmond to Philadelphia, from the slave state of Virginia to the free state of Pennsylvania, a distance of 250 miles.

Brown was the ultimate "escape artist," as Daphne Brooks brilliantly labels him in her book *Bodies in Dissent*. And as we shall see, he not only performed his amazing -- and quite dangerous -- escape once, but reprised part of the journey during a lecture tour in England. But I get ahead of my story.

Henry Brown was born into slavery on a plantation called "The Hermitage" in Louisa County, Va., around 1815, fairly close to Charlottesville, where Thomas Jefferson was still living at Monticello. Upon his master's death, when Brown was 15, he was sent to work for his late owner's son, William, in his tobacco factory in Richmond. In about 1836, he married another slave (curiously, with their owners' consent), a woman named Nancy, who was owned by a bank clerk. Brown was able to rent a house for his family. Together, they had three children.

Over time, Nancy was sold twice. Her third owner, Samuel Cottrell, actually charged Brown \$50 a year to keep Nancy from being sold. But in August 1848, Cottrell sold Nancy anyway, along with their three children, to a Methodist minister in North Carolina. Brown raced to the jail where his family was being held, but it was too late. As they were shuffled through the streets of Richmond, Brown held Nancy's hand for four miles. Nancy and the three children were marched on foot along with 350 other

slaves, in the horrendous journey, all the way to North Carolina. Nancy was pregnant with their fourth child. The two would never see each other again.

Brown tells us in his slave narrative that he begged his own master to purchase his family but his master refused: "I went to my *Christian* master ... but he shoved me away."

Devastated and overcome with the most acute sense of his own powerlessness, Brown sought guidance through prayer. "An idea," he reported, "suddenly flashed across my mind." And what an idea it was! "Brown's revelation," Paul Finkelman and Richard Newman write "was that he have himself nailed into a wooden box and 'conveyed as dry goods' via the Adams Express Company from slavery in Richmond to freedom in Philadelphia."



How was he to realize such a bold, and wild, idea? How would he avoid suffocation in this coffin-like encasement? What about claustrophobia? How long could a human being live in a box without dehydration? Not to mention deal with his body functions? As Brown's biographer, Jeffrey Ruggles, explains, Adams Express advertised the one-day trip from Richmond to Philadelphia, a distance of 250 miles -- but only if the package encountered no glitches, no delays. If so, the trip could take much longer. Could a human being survive such a trip? Or

would his crate turn into his casket?

Though only 5 feet, 8 inches tall, Brown at the time weighed 200 pounds, so this was not going to be an easy thing to accomplish, and impossible, of course, without a lot of assistance. Two friends, both named Smith, decided to help Henry with this crazy scheme: James Smith, a free black man who sang with Brown in the choir of First African Baptist Church, introduced Brown to Samuel Smith, a white shoemaker and gambler. Brown paid Samuel Smith \$86 to help him.

Through James Smith's intervention, a black carpenter named John Mattaner built the wooden box -- "complete with baize lining, air holes, a container of water and hickory straps" -- to fit Brown's rotund frame. Samuel Smith corresponded with James McKim, the Philadelphia abolitionist for guidance. McKim asked Smith to address the package to James Johnson, 131 Arch Street.

As Henry Brown scholar Hollis Robbins writes in a 2009 article, "Smith's correspondence with McKim about the timing of the trip, particularly his attention to the breakup of the ice on the Susquehanna [River], indicates his -- and perhaps Brown's -- practical understanding of the conditions necessary for the box to arrive swiftly enough for Brown to survive the journey." The entire box measured only 3 feet 1 inch long, 2 feet wide and 2 feet 6 inches high. Brown burned his hand with sulphuric acid (oil of vitriol) so he could justify taking the day off without raising suspicion. He took along a few biscuits, or crackers, and a small bladder of water to sustain him.

With "This Side Up With Care" painted on the container, at 4:00 a.m. on March 23, 1849, Brown's friends loaded his boxed self onto a wagon, and delivered it to the depot. In his slave narrative, Brown describes his harrowing journey, including the sickening effect of traveling much of the journey

upside-down, head-first, in spite of the label on the box. One wrong move, one unguarded sound or smell, would lead to his detection, capture, imprisonment and return to slavery, and perhaps to the Deep South.

Brown nearly died on the 27-hour trip: At one point, he was turned upside-down for several hours. His sole relief came when two passengers, wanting to talk, tipped the box flat to sit on it. The box was flipped again when it was boarded on a train in Washington, D.C. Brown had no choice but to remain silent and not move, no matter how the box was positioned.

Some 24 hours later, as Robbins describes, traveling by wagon to the depot, hefted by express workers from wagon to railcar, to steamboat, to another wagon, to another railcar, to a ferry and the once again by railcar, Brown finally arrived at the depot in Philadelphia. Three hours later, Brown's box was taken by wagon to the Anti-Slavery Committee's offices on North Fifth Street in Philadelphia. No one could know if their cargo was alive or dead. The four waiting abolitionists, including McKim, tapped on the lip of the crate four times, the signal that all was clear.

Finkelman and Newman describe what happened next: "A small, nervous group, including William Still, the African-American conductor of Philadelphia's Underground Railroad, pried open the lid to reveal ... the disheveled and battered Henry Brown, who arose and promptly fainted," but not before exclaiming, "How do you do, gentlemen!"

Revived with a glass of water, Brown sang Psalm 40: "Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me!" McKim noted that the trip "nearly killed him," and that "Nothing saved him from suffocation but the free use of water ... with which he bathed his face, and the constant fanning of himself" with his hat. He managed to breathe through the three small holes that he bore in the box with a gimlet. Brown called his trip "my resurrection from the grave of slavery."

Henceforth, the word "Box" would become Henry's self-chosen legal middle name, with no quotation marks around it.

Henry Box Brown had done what no slave anywhere had ever done before: He had mailed himself to freedom. Overnight, Brown became quite the celebrity on the abolitionist lecture circuit. He and his friend James Smith became a standard feature at abolitionist rallies, reciting the incredible saga of his escape, and selling his book, which was published just a few months after his escape. Woodcuts of his head popping out of the wooden crate were widely circulated.

Accompanied onstage by Benjamin F. Roberts, a black abolitionist, who would lecture on "The Condition of the Colored People in the United



States," Brown toured the North testifying about the evils of slavery and repeating the details of his imaginative mode of escape. Brown -- a great storyteller with a gifted voice for song -- was for a short time the darling of the abolitionist circuit.

Frederick Douglass' irritation with Brown stemmed not so much from a sense of rivalry (since Douglass had dominated the fugitive-slave category on the abolition lecture circuit since 1845) as it did from Douglass' worry that disclosure of Brown's novel method of escape might keep other slaves from employing a similar strategy, alerting authorities to the possibility that crates could contain a fleeing slave.

Douglass proved to be right about the effects of disclosure: Upon discovery of the rescue attempt of a second slave on May 8, 1849, Samuel Smith, the white shopkeeper who had helped Brown, was arrested, and served six and a half years in the Virginia state penitentiary for doing so. A few months later, on Sept. 25, James Smith would also be arrested for an attempt to help still another slave to escape in the same way.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 put an end, for a time, to Brown's celebrity, at least on this side of the Atlantic. After being assaulted twice on the streets of Providence, R.I., Brown -- like many other prominent fugitive slaves -- fled to England in October 1850, to avoid arrest by a slave-catcher.

There, he published a second edition of his slave narrative in Manchester in 1851, this one "written by himself." (The first edition had been dictated to, and heavily edited by, a white abolitionist named Charles Stearns. John Ernest's edition, published in 2009, is the authoritative text.) Ever the showman, Brown soon became a most colorful feature on the British lecture circuit.

Brown was a complicated figure. There is some evidence that he could have purchased the freedom of his wife, Nancy, and their children, but chose not to. He married an Englishwoman and returned to the stage, performing for the remainder of the decade throughout Great Britain, in a traveling one-man version of Black History Month. The consummate multiplatform performer, Brown created a number of personas to match his skills as a narrator, singer, magician, hypnotist, electro-biologist and "boxing" champion, among them "The African Prince," "The King of All Mesmerizers" and "Professor H. Box Brown."

In 1875, at the age of 60, Brown returned to the United States, touring New England with his show, now called "The African Prince's Drawing-Room Entertainment." To the end, Brown advertised himself as "the man 'whose escape from slavery in 1849 in a box 3 feet 1 inch long, 2 feet wide, 2 feet six inches high, caused such a sensation in the New England States, he having traveled from Richmond, Va. To Philadelphia, a journey of 350 miles, packed as luggage in a box.'" The last reference to Brown appeared in the Brantford, Ontario, newspaper on Feb. 26, 1889, advertising one of his performances. There is no record of his death -- his last great disappearing act.